

What Literature Fosters the Examination of Bullying Behaviors?

Thirteen Reasons Why: Exploring Bullying through Multigenre Writing

Katina D. Childers
Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio
childers.9@wright.edu

Bullying and its consequences became an emerging theme as my juniors and seniors read young adult novels for a multigenre response project. Though students had immense choice in novel selection, the overwhelming favorite (chosen by one in every six students) was Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This novel, which focuses on the suicide of a young teenage girl, quickly became the focus of many group discussions. From these discussions several research topics developed: teenage suicide rates, reasons, and warning signs as well as teenage bullying and the effects on the bullied. Through their research, students examined how bullying, either in person or through other venues (such as cyberbullying, creating rumors, or isolation), affects students so profoundly that the consequences can be life threatening.

As pointed out by Nancy Mack, writing topics should "make use of the unique knowledge and skills that students already have, connecting school work in a respectful way to things that they value in their personal lives" (98). These multigenre projects, which replaced the traditional monogenre research paper, offered students a variety of means in which to incorporate their understanding of the text, showcase the information gathered from primary and secondary sources, and voice their unique life experiences. Some of the best projects included brochures with statistical information and wanted posters for bullies stating their "crime," as well as Fakebook pages, lie detector test results, and double voice poems written

from the perspective of the bullied and the bully (see figs. 1 and 2 for good examples).

This multigenre approach allowed students to explore bullying from multiple perspectives, each piece adding new insight; moreover, individual projects were authentic, unique, and a joy to read.

FIGURE 1. Student Brochure Incorporating Research on Bullying and Teenage Suicide

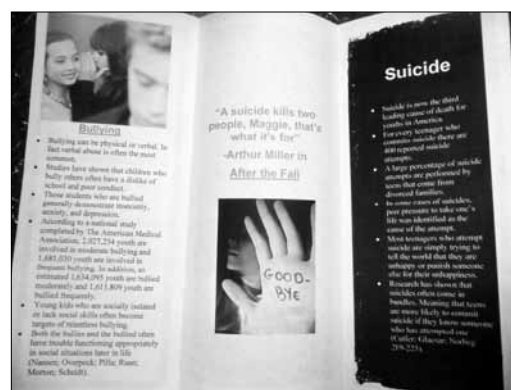


FIGURE 2. Student Anti-Bullying Word Search



Examining Literary Characters Who Bully


Annamary Consalvo

Fitchburg State University
Fitchburg, Massachusetts
aconsalv@fitchburgstate.edu

As part of their critical literacy skills, students must be able to discern acts or texts of bullying—big and small—and not just those after-the-fact examples of newscasts or those of dystopic governments, both fictive and real. Literature offers a way to examine the character of characters through the flexible distancing of an imagined world where readers can critically reflect on characters' actions. Whether carried out through physical intimidation or verbal abuse, perpetrated by a government, gang, or individual, bullying is always about making the bully feel bigger, more powerful, and more in charge. Bullying actions are intended to make intended victims feel humiliated, afraid, and powerless. Bullying is about coercion, force, and silencing; it's about bullies having their own way and removing the rights and voices of those whom they wish to dominate. Bullies come in a variety of shapes and sizes, some of which are surprising—a pretty girl, a popular athlete, a respected father, a grandmotherly woman. Other guises of bullying are less surprising and may be clothed in uniforms of authority.

The Crucible by Arthur Miller depicts acts of bullying and how those acts lead to tragic consequences. Abigail Williams, Reverend Parris, and Thomas Putnam are three characters who manipulate circumstances for their own benefit. Abigail is vengeful because John Proctor has rejected her, Parris is power hungry, and Putnam is greedy. In a

writing exercise, students can focus on one of these characters and list several of his or her actions of bullying others. Next to those actions, students note how each action affected other people in the book. Students can imagine that this character has time-traveled into today, slyly changing his or her name, clothes, and occupation—but is still a bully at heart. Teachers can invite students to consider the following: What would those same actions of bullying look like in your school, neighborhood, or community? For example, would your character use the Internet? How would his or her actions ripple out and affect other people? What piece of advice would you give a close friend of yours who started hanging out with this newcomer? How would you warn that friend and what would you say? Among the many genres that this prewriting could provoke are advice columns, letters to friends or teachers, scripts with stage and/or camera directions, imagined final chapters, song lyrics, graphic novel chapters, and news reports.

Often charismatic and convincing, bullies can be hard to ignore; sometimes they lead normally reasonable and kind people to act in dishonest and cruel ways. Using characters from literature to engage students in a close analysis of bullying can be a way to help them critically consider actions and consequences, as well as helping them to envision and enact a more equitable future. Figure 1 is a graphic organizer that helps students examine bullying behaviors productively. 

Work Cited

Mack, Nancy. "The Ins, Outs, and In-Betweens of Multi-genre Writing." *English Journal* 92.2 (2002): 91–98. Print.

FIGURE 1. Graphic Organizer for Examining Characters Who Bully

Your character:		Your time-traveled character:	
Action in original setting:	How this action affects others:	Action in new setting:	Advice for others to help defend themselves from the bully's actions:

In what ways is this character dangerous? How are his or her intentions disguised?